

SAN JOSE MUSEUM OF ART



SELECTIONS FROM THE
PERMANENT COLLECTION
OF THE WHITNEY MUSEUM
OF AMERICAN ART

This exhibition is organized jointly by the Whitney Museum of American Art and the San Jose Museum of Art. The project team includes, from the Whitney Museum: Adam D. Weinberg, Curator of the Permanent Collection; Constance Wolf, Associate Director for Public Programs; and Beth Venn, Assistant Curator; from the San Jose Museum of Art Peter Gordon, Chief Curator; and Cheryl Kiddoo, Curator of Education for Interpretation. All works of art are from the Permanent Collection of the Whitney Museum of American Art.

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S A N J O S E
M U S E U M O F A R T

**AMERICAN ART
1900-1940:
A HISTORY
RECONSIDERED**

SELECTIONS FROM THE
PERMANENT COLLECTION
OF THE WHITNEY MUSEUM
OF AMERICAN ART

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American Art 1900-1940: A History Reconsidered represents the culmination of an unprecedented collaboration between East and West Coast museums – an artistic association which will extend through the next six years and will, we believe, be a national model for bringing our country's greatest art treasures to new audiences. The Whitney Museum of American Art in New York contains the largest and most comprehensive collection of twentieth-century American art in the world. The San Jose Museum of Art recently completed construction of an unparalleled new exhibition space. We are fortunate indeed to be able to combine the Whitney's collection and San Jose's space in an exhibition initiative that will provide a rich artistic and educational resource for the people of the Bay Area.

This exhibition is the first of four to be drawn from the Whitney Museum's Permanent Collection and presented in San Jose. It offers more than one hundred paintings created roughly during the first half of the century by artists whose works are landmarks in the history of American art.

Turn-of-the-century author Frank Norris predicted that American fiction of his time would lead people into "a world of the working man, crude of speech, swift of action, strong of passion, straight to the heart of a new life." It is this life – a vital and innovative era of rapid change, burgeoning technology, and new ideas that redefined who and what we are as a nation – that

the artists in this exhibition captured for the first time on canvas.

Although their works have now become some of the most familiar images of our national cultural identity, artists such as Georgia O'Keeffe, Edward Hopper, Max Weber, and George Bellows were pioneers of their time. It is especially appropriate that now, approaching the turn of another century, these artists should be on long-term exhibition in the heart of Silicon Valley – whose latter-day pioneers in industry and technology have transformed contemporary American life anew.

A collaboration of this magnitude is not possible without broad support from the community. We owe a special thanks to Susan Hammer, Mayor, City of San Jose; Councilman Joe Head; and Frank Taylor, Executive Director of The Redevelopment Agency, City of San Jose – whose vision has extended beyond bricks and mortar to a belief in the fundamental importance of the arts in any municipality that aspires to be a great city.

We are grateful for that vision, and for the opportunity to join together in presenting these significant works of American art for the first time to the people of the Bay Area.

Josi irene Callan, Director
San Jose Museum of Art

David A. Ross, Alice Pratt Brown Director
Whitney Museum of American Art



Gaston Lachaise (1882-1935)

Standing Woman, 1912-27

Bronze, 69 $\frac{1}{2}$ x 26 $\frac{15}{16}$ x 17 in.

Purchase

From the turn of the century to the years leading up to World War II, America was shaken by dramatic political and cultural changes, shifting between great periods of prosperity and despair – beginning with the assassination of President McKinley and followed by World War I, our emergence as a world industrial leader, the Great Depression, and a growing sense of optimism generated by technological advances and social improvements. Artists responded to these social and economic upheavals by creating new visions for a society in search of its own cultural identity.

A*merican Art 1900-1940: A History Reconsidered* explores the evolution of styles and artistic tendencies from this defining period in the chronicle of American art. While there is much value in viewing works of art in roughly chronological sequence under the guise of prevailing artistic styles, movements, and schools, these forty years comprise a much more complex narrative than can be adequately addressed by a single art historical approach.

The aesthetic diversity of this period can be more thoroughly explored by examining American art through the lens of several key questions.

The first, rarely asked and often taken for granted, is “What is a masterpiece?” – why have some works of art come to symbolize an era so completely, and loom so large in our collective imagination?

The second, “What is American about American art?”

asks what defines a national artistic identity. Are there subjects and styles that are intrinsically American?

The last question, “Why have some media been more highly valued than others?” deals with the traditional hierarchy that accorded more significance to painting and sculpture than to works on paper – prints, drawings, and photographs. How did artists challenge this hierarchy in the early years of the century, and what effect did this have on American art?

Examining American art both chronologically and through these questions enables us to perceive the alternative ways in which this history can be studied, thus providing a fuller and more informed understanding of our artistic legacy. We hope that visitors to the exhibition will not only appreciate the significance of these art works, but also reconsider how and why they have become important.




Edward Hopper (1882-1967)

Railroad Sunset, 1929

Oil on canvas, 28 $\frac{1}{4}$ x 47 $\frac{3}{4}$ in.

Josephine N. Hopper Bequest

ur look at the richness and diversity of American art before World War II begins with a deceptively simple question: "What is a masterpiece?" In the Middle

Ages, a masterpiece was the work a craftsman prepared at the conclusion of his training to qualify him for the rank of "master" in his guild. Although this original definition has long been obsolete, we have never found an authoritative modern replacement.

Depending on whom you ask today, the idea of a masterpiece differs. The term "masterpiece" can be synonymous with great or classic; it can be overused or meaningless; it can transcend criticism or analysis; it can describe the essence of beauty, or the epitome of technical brilliance; it can be objective and universal – or highly personal and subjective. Overall, the use of the term fuels a debate over how individual paintings, sculptures, or works on paper receive the label of "masterpiece" and what the defining characteristics of a masterpiece might be.

We ask the question here not to establish a set of criteria by which to judge art, nor to validate every object in this exhibition as a "masterpiece." Rather, the question is rhetorical, intended to provoke and engage viewers in a reconsideration of the works exhibited and of the achievements of artists during this particularly fertile period.

One way to explore this issue in relation to works of art is to raise questions about the varying criteria commonly used to judge them: the social, political,

WHAT IS A MASTERPIECE?

economic, and aesthetic factors that can contribute to the evaluation of a work at one moment – and the sometimes dramatic changes in this evaluation over time; the role of art as a document of a

particular historical moment; and the confluence of circumstances and opportunities that allow certain objects to emerge as highly esteemed treasures. The following discussions examine the masterpiece status of works by Georgia O'Keeffe, Stanton Macdonald-Wright, Paul Cadmus, and Charles Demuth. They demonstrate that the meaning of the word masterpiece, like that of art itself, can change over time.

Georgia O'Keeffe is unquestionably regarded as one of the most original and beloved American artists of the twentieth century. Her near-mythical status has come about through biographical events as well as outstanding artistic achievements. While her childhood on a Midwestern farm solidified her affinity for landscape and nature, her legendary marriage to noted photographer and art dealer Alfred Stieglitz introduced her to new European and American avant-garde art. Stieglitz made a series of startling, romantic photographs of O'Keeffe, so often shown that, for many, O'Keeffe came to be identified by these images. It was in her early years in New York City that O'Keeffe evolved a highly personal and piercing artistic vocabulary of natural forms and colors that distinguished her from her contemporaries, and has captured the imagination of Americans ever since. It was also during this time that O'Keeffe gained recognition



Georgia O'Keeffe (1887-1986)

The White Calico Flower, 1931

Oil on canvas, 30 x 36 in.

Purchase



Stanton Macdonald-Wright (1890-1973)

"Oriental." Synchromy in Blue-green, 1918

Oil on canvas, 36 x 50 in.

Purchase

as a successful artist in a traditionally male-dominated art world.

When her work was first exhibited at Stieglitz's 291 gallery, it generated unusual controversy. As Stieglitz later recalled, it "created a sensation: there were two distinct camps – one deeply moved, as though before a revelation; the other consisting of many professional artists, horrified at my showing of such work..." It did not take long, however, before she was, as one critic wrote in 1927, "perhaps the most original painter in America today....she has discovered a beautiful language, with unsuspected melodies and rhythms, and has created in this language a new set of symbols; by these means she has opened up a whole area of human consciousness...." She achieved this through a vernacular vocabulary of nature – landscapes, desert scenes, and especially flowers – but nature as it had never before been scrutinized. She said of her flower paintings: "In the twenties, huge buildings sometimes seemed to be going up overnight in New York. At that time I saw a painting by Fantin-Latour, a still life with flowers I found very beautiful, but I realized that were I to paint the same flowers so small, no one would look at them because I was unknown. So I thought I'll make them big like the huge buildings going up. People will be startled; they'll have to look at them – and they did."

The White Calico Flower is one of these "big" flowers – a magnified, isolated blossom that occupies the entire canvas surface. But the blossom has been singled out and so enlarged that the overall effect is of

partial abstraction. In this case, the flower is not a real one; it was painted from a cloth flower worn by mourning women in New Mexico.

Widely exhibited and reproduced, *The White Calico Flower* is just one of many paintings by O'Keeffe that has become emblematic of the achievements of American artists. With a career spanning more than sixty-five years, her work demonstrates that, for some artists, masterpieces are not the result of a once-in-a-lifetime burst of creativity but are highlights of a career filled with exploration, discovery, and leadership.

Stanton Macdonald-Wright never gained the popularity or notoriety of O'Keeffe. He has remained a relatively obscure artist, whose work has been infrequently exhibited. Nevertheless, his early paintings continue to be highly regarded because they pioneered a dramatic shift in art making – they were among the first nonrepresentational works produced. In 1913, while living in Europe, Macdonald-Wright, along with his colleague Morgan Russell, launched an entire art movement, called Synchromism, whose doctrine and program purported that color was form. Synchromy is a word they invented: "It is to color what symphony is to sound....Color, in order to function significantly, must be used as an abstract medium."

"*Oriental.*" *Synchromy in Blue-green* is considered one of the great works to embody the principles of Synchromism. Thinly applied layers of blue-greens and purples are punctuated by advancing areas of hot red, setting up a series of color contrasts and drawing the viewer into the painting's whirling force. The

boundaries between forms, rather than being clearly delineated, bleed and dissolve into one another.

Synchromism as a movement did not last long, and attracted only a few interested American colleagues. In 1919, only a year after completing "*Oriental*." *Synchromy in Blue-green*, Macdonald-Wright moved to California and retired from active exhibiting until 1931. The focus of his later work shifted away from his early experimentations to more conventional explorations of color and form, abstraction and representation.

Macdonald-Wright may have rejected his own early work, but art history did not. Today Synchromism is regarded as an important moment of bold experimentation pioneered by intrepid young Americans who would help make abstraction an acceptable art form.

The art of Paul Cadmus also has been received with varying degrees of enthusiasm throughout his career. Unlike Macdonald-Wright, however, Cadmus works out of a figurative tradition based on contemporary subject matter. The very themes he depicted caused the rise and fall of his fortunes. *Shore Leave* was the first in a series of three paintings from the 1930s depicting a group of sailors and their companions cavorting in Manhattan's Riverside Park, an uptown stretch of land bordering the Hudson River. The park was then known as a pickup spot, especially for sailors.

The series itself became notorious, primarily because of its implicit and explicit references to homoeroticism. At the behest of the Navy, a later rendering of the subject was removed from public view. A naval

officer complained: "It represents a most disgraceful, sordid, disreputable drunken brawl wherein apparently a number of enlisted men are consorting with a party of streetwalkers....This is an unwarranted insult to the enlisted men of the American Navy...."

To other observers, however, Cadmus' paintings were highly expressive and earned him a reputation as one of the most gifted young artists in the realist tradition. In the words of a critic in 1937, Cadmus was an "artist who promises to play a dominant role in the growing art of this century."

Although he continued to make new paintings in the postwar years, Cadmus worked in relative obscurity, largely eclipsed by the rise of Abstract Expressionism and the renunciation of the realist tradition. It is only in the past two decades that there has been a renewed interest in his art, as there has been in the realist traditions of the 1930s and representational art in general. In Cadmus' case, moreover, the recent scholarship in gay and lesbian studies has provided new perspectives, particularly on the paintings that were censored in the 1930s. This reconsideration of Cadmus' work demonstrates that at least one process for redefining a masterpiece evolves out of sociocultural criteria.

Works of art can also achieve the status of masterpieces because they reorient or reconceptualize our understanding of the role of art in society. Precisionism, for example, marked a new era in the development of American art, for it celebrated American industry, the modern metropolis, and the advancement of technology. Charles Demuth was a pioneer of this



Paul Cadmus (b. 1904)

Shore Leave, 1933

Oil on canvas, 33 x 36 in.

Gift of Malcolm S. Farbes

Charles Demuth
(1883-1935)
My Egypt, 1927
Oil on
composition board,
35³/₄ x 30 in.
Purchase, with
funds from Gertrude
Vanderbilt Whitney



movement, and his *My Egypt* has become an icon of the American fascination with modern life and the machine age. One of the largest paintings Demuth ever executed, *My Egypt* embodies his transformation of European avant-garde styles – Cubist abstraction and Futurist ray lines – into something that became quintessentially American. He constructed a geometric composition from the twin grain elevators in the rural community of Lancaster, Pennsylvania, where he was born and his family had lived since the late eighteenth century. The grain elevators represented a modern addition to the skyline of Lancaster and symbolized the technological advancement of the local agricultural industry. In this scene of great majesty, all human activity has been eliminated; the towering elevators stand as if there for all eternity.

The title of the work has no definitive meaning or reference, but has generated considerable fascination and speculation. Could it simply be a witty comparison between the American grain elevator and the Egyptian pyramid, both testimonials to progress and achievement? Did Demuth intend an ironic contrast between the great structures of antiquity and the equally monumental, but commercial, buildings that dominated his own landscape? On a more personal level, did *My Egypt* invoke a biblical parallel between Demuth's plight as a progressive artist, weakened by illness, living in rural Pennsylvania, with that of the Israelites enslaved in Egypt?

My Egypt was purchased in 1931 by Gertrude Vanderbilt Whitney, the same year she opened the

doors to the Whitney Museum of American Art. She had previously offered her collection of more than five hundred works by American artists to the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, only to be turned down without any consideration or discussion. This indifference to the achievements of American artists reflected an attitude, prevalent in the years before World War II, that American artists were in the shadow of their European counterparts and were, therefore, incapable of creating masterpieces worthy of national or international recognition. Still determined to transform her holdings into a definitive public collection and resource, she founded the Whitney Museum. Her goal was not to display "masterpieces," but to publicly acknowledge and support the accomplishments and vision of living American artists.

Today no one would question the right of American art to claim a legitimate place in the history of twentieth-century art; nor would anyone withhold the accolade of masterpiece purely on the basis of national origin. As we reconsider the works of art in the present exhibition, it is useful to remember both the initial attitude of indifference to these artists as well as Mrs. Whitney's perseverance on their part—not merely because it led to the establishment of the Whitney Museum of American Art, but because it proves once again how easily the values of one generation can be overturned by another.

Constance Wolf

WHAT
IS AMERICAN
ABOUT
AMERICAN ART?

In any investigation, it is necessary to formulate precise questions in order to obtain conclusive answers. Moreover, how a question is framed determines the nature and, to a degree, the response one is likely to get. "What is American about American art?" presupposes the existence of something essentially or intrinsically American. It also assumes that something to be a singular or dominant aesthetic. Most important, it suggests that there is a unified American culture that gives rise to American art.

There are, of course, many alternative questions that address the same issue: What are the diverse characteristics common to American art? How does American art differ from the art of other cultures? How does American art reflect American culture? Each of these and numerous other variants would change the potential response. The first question might elicit an enumeration of multiple distinctions. The second might provide comparative responses. The third might demonstrate parallels between American society and its art.

The question is historically determined. At least since the nineteenth century the notion has existed that there is something that can be thought of as fundamentally American in American art. During the first decade of the twentieth century, with the formation of the Ashcan School, the question took on greater urgency. These artists, also known as The Eight, battled with the traditionalists who believed in depicting

only lofty subjects. As journalist-illustrators-turned-painters, The Eight tried to capture a truly American subject matter by painting the underclasses in the urban slums of New York. Their leader and influential teacher Robert Henri wrote: "As I see it, there is only one reason for the development of art in America, and that is that the people of America learn the means of expressing themselves in their own time and in their own land."

In the 1920s, the search for a vernacular American aesthetic was carried on by the artists called Precisionists. Precisionism, a style based on clean, crisp lines and contours, pure, simplified forms, and flat, unmodulated color, celebrated indigenous architecture, industry, and machinery. This aesthetic grew out of what poet William Carlos Williams called "a sense of place."

Artists such as Charles Sheeler were not interested in the subjects of daily life but rather, as one historian put it, "in a new American reality," based on purity of conception. With the rise of so-called American Scene Painting and Regionalism during the 1930s, the idea of a native American art became a definitive and even exclusive doctrine closely associated with the rise of nationalistic, sometimes isolationist, sentiment after World War I. Thomas Hart Benton, the most outspoken and chauvinistic of Regionalist painters, wrote: "No American art can come to those who do not live an American life, who do not have an American psychology, and who



Edward Hopper (1882-1967)

Soir Bleu, 1914

Oil on canvas, 36 x 72 in.

Josephine N. Hopper Bequest

cannot find an American justification for their lives."

The very framing of the question "What is American about American art?" is itself revealing. Why do Americans feel it necessary to ask? The reason usually given is that our history is much briefer than that of other cultures, and we have had to borrow so much from the art of those cultures that we feel compelled to assert our independence. But perhaps it is the idea of the search itself that is so American. As Lloyd Goodrich, former director of the Whitney Museum, wrote in 1958, "One of the most American traits is our urge to define what is American." It seems to be a national preoccupation to scrutinize our rural landscape, our urban environment, and our architectural and industrial forms to locate that which is essentially American.

Despite the dominance of such essentialism in American thought, there have always been those who perceived the inherent fallacy in the notion. As early as 1864, the critic James Jackson Jarves wrote, "We are a composite people. Our knowledge is eclectic...it remains then for us to be as eclectic in our art as in the rest of our civilization." Nearly one hundred years later, Holger Cahill, national director of the Federal Art Project of the WPA in the 1930s, stated: "I don't think it is particularly important to ask whether or not a work is American. What is important is to discover what experience a work of art expresses and if that experience is American to recognize it."

What observers such as Jarves and Cahill acknowledged is that American art is not a single fixed entity. The Americans who have created it are from diverse ethnic, economic, and regional backgrounds. Moreover, culture itself is unstable, so why should we expect the art it produces to be fixed? In this sense, asking what is American about American art, searching for a singular national aesthetic, seems a naive endeavor; today it is certainly a dated one. During the first half of this century, however, it was a prevailing concern, and it affected even those artists who claimed no interest in the "Americanness" of what they created. The question is therefore being posed – and its validity sometimes challenged – in order to provide a context for understanding artistic achievement in the United States before World War II.

Many people now regard Edward Hopper as the most American of American artists. Yet his art derived from several non-American sources, some of which survive in his mature painting. As a student of Ashcan painter Robert Henri from 1900 until 1906, Hopper produced works in the spirit of the Ashcan School. However, during his three trips to Paris between 1906 and 1910, his works shifted from the dark, creamy earth tones of the Ashcan painters to the brilliant, shimmering hues of the French Impressionists. In the several dozen paintings he made in these years, we see some of the same subjects and many of the same techniques employed by the Impressionists.

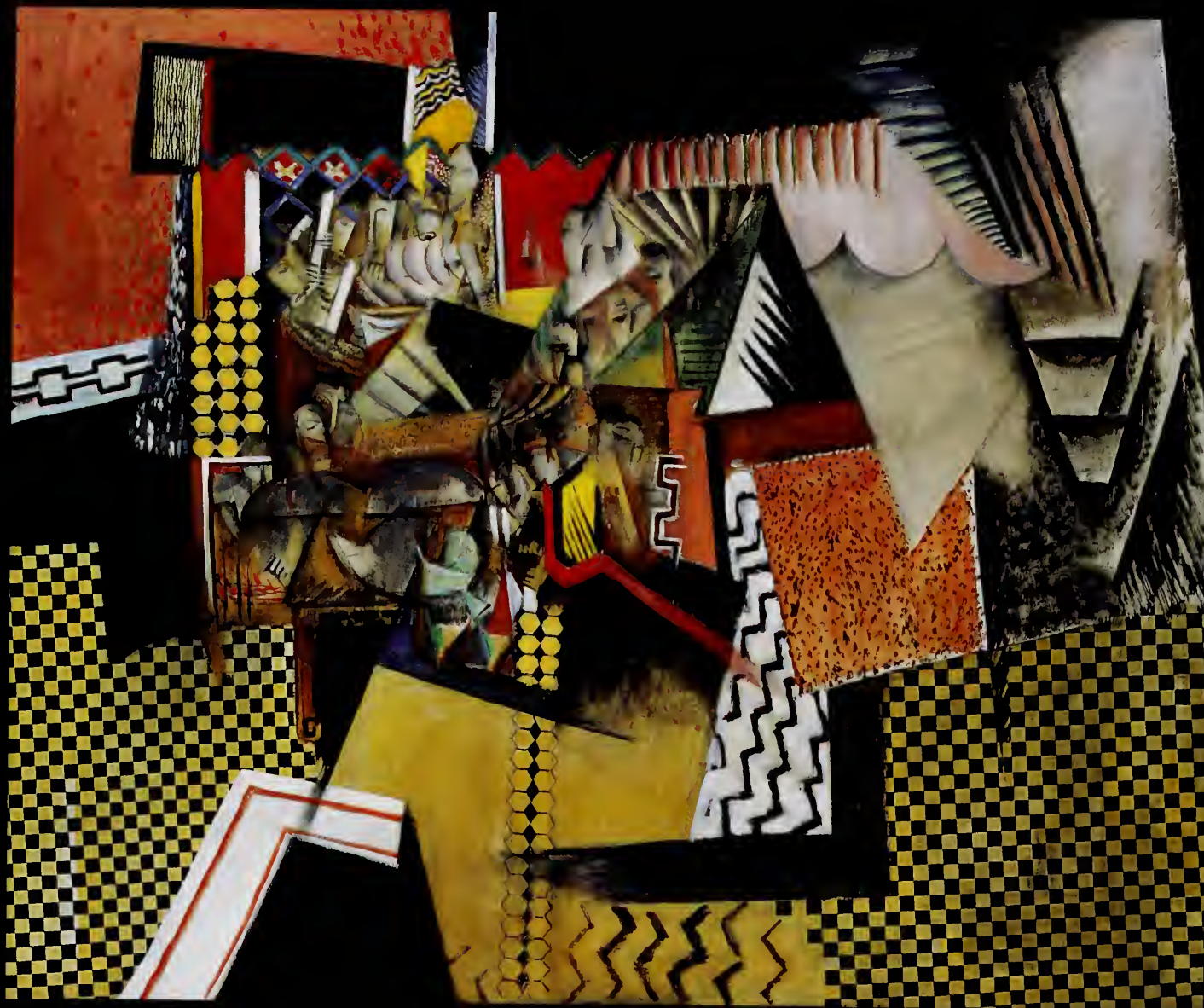
It is therefore not surprising to find Impressionist color and brushwork in Hopper's New England seascapes beginning in 1912, and even in his mature works. As Hopper himself stated late in his career, "I think I am still an Impressionist."

Several years after his return to the United States, Hopper made what was to be one of his largest and most ambitious paintings. Painted in 1914, *Soir Bleu* is unlike anything he had done before; and, thanks perhaps to the negative responses of the critics, quite unlike anything that he would do afterward. When he exhibited *Soir Bleu* in New York in 1915, it was hung alongside another painting, *New York Corner*. The latter work, although it retained some Impressionist aspects, was praised by the press, probably because it was a straightforward presentation of a familiar New York genre scene painted in the now-conventional tones of the Ashcan palette. *Soir Bleu's* European "fantasy" subject, by contrast, included a surreal and risqué mixture of types—among them a clown smoking a cigarette, a pimp, and a prostitute, all disquietingly isolated and disconnected from one another. The palette derives from French Impressionism. Moreover, the picture is radically disrupted by a vertical pilaster that creates a discomforting compartmentalization. In its treatment of space, *Soir Bleu* particularly recalls the work of French painter Edgar Degas, while its color and subject are reminiscent of Toulouse-Lautrec.

Although *Soir Bleu* is a more adventurous,

ambitious, and accomplished work than *New York Corner*, nationalistic critics of the day were unanimous in rejecting it. "Edward Hopper is not quite successful with his *Soir Bleu*, a group of hardened Parisian absinthe drinkers, but he is entirely so with his *New York Corner*," wrote one reviewer in 1915. Hopper never again exhibited the painting. Nevertheless, *Soir Bleu* has strong compositional parallels with his later works, and in many respects the detached treatment of the figures, the still atmosphere, and dramatic use of architectural elements foreshadow much of what is now hailed as his classic American style. Despite Hopper's occasional hostile statements about European art ("We are not French and never can be and any attempt to be so is to deny our inheritance"), he also wisely understood that "to expect a new and entirely unique art in America is not to understand the lesson of history – the logical growth of the art of one nation from that of another or others."

One of the hidden issues in the question, "What is American about American art?" was whether artists who had not been born, raised, and schooled in the United States could create an American art. This issue took on even greater import with the mounting waves of immigration preceding World War II. Today, the answer seems to be an easy affirmative: of the seventy artists included in this exhibition, for example, just under a third were foreign born, and many of these artists today are thought of as prime figures in American art.



Max Weber (1881-1961)
Chinese Restaurant, 1915
Oil on canvas, 40 x 48 in.
Purchase

One of the most significant and influential of these immigrant artists was Max Weber. Weber, born in Bialystok, then part of Russia, in 1881, was from a poor, deeply religious Jewish background. His family moved to Brooklyn, New York, when he was ten. Only Yiddish was spoken in his house, and religious proscriptions kept him from displaying the art works he created as a youngster at home. He spent his formative years living essentially a bicultural existence. His vivid memories of the ecstatic Hasidic rituals and of Russian folk art had a lasting effect on his work. Equally enduring in effect were the four years he spent in Paris beginning in 1905. During this time, he came into contact with the radical innovations in painting by Paul Cézanne and Pablo Picasso, and organized a class with Henri Matisse. As a result of this exposure to avant-garde art and artists, Weber developed a modern style which led him to flatten space, break up and distort forms, and use color in a non-naturalistic fashion.

Weber's celebrated painting *Chinese Restaurant* merges his European-influenced Synthetic Cubist style with what was for Weber a quintessentially American subject – eating in a New York Chinese restaurant. This work deconstructs the interior and the figures of the restaurant and recombines them into one vibrantly discordant whole through high-key color, syncopated patterns, and repeated angular forms. This painting, considered to be a masterpiece of American art, is a melange created by an immigrant Russian artist, work-

ing in a Western European idiom, and depicting typical American subject matter – a restaurant run by immigrants. Although Weber's Cubist style has some marked "American" characteristics, and the subject of restaurants was a popular one with Ashcan painters, does this make his art American? One way to consider Weber's work in this regard is to accept that no matter what his birthplace or the derivation of his style, the works he made were created in and contributed to an American context. The ground he was breaking with his modernist art was American ground.

Unlike Max Weber, Charles Sheeler was born in the United States of Anglo-American ancestry. His paintings both in subject and style have been considered supreme examples of a quintessential American art. Cultural historian Constance Rourke subtitled the first serious monograph on his work *Artist in the American Tradition* (1938). In her introductory note, Rourke proudly and possessively pronounced that his "lineage in art is unmistakably our own" and that his work is recognized "for the imprint it shows of forms which strongly and essentially belong to us." The subjects she thought to be so American were of this country's rural and urban landscape, its industry and its objects, handmade or manufactured. The style she refers to is consistent with those aesthetic characteristics thought to be historically American: clarity, repose, and realism based on direct observation, with romantic overtones.

Sheeler also took the obligatory artist's voyage to Paris, where he too had contact with the avant-garde creations of Picasso, Braque, and Matisse. His early interest in Cubism gradually began to exert influence and alter the direction of his work. Upon his return to Philadelphia, he took a weekend house in nearby Bucks County, where he continued his artistic investigations. About the same time, he taught himself photography and began to earn a living as an architectural photographer. These two factors – contact with the rural Pennsylvania countryside and his commitment to photography as a documentary medium – were crucial factors to his development. Sheeler was able to forge a unique style that combined the abstract tendencies of European Cubism with a profound devotion to objective presentation of fact. According to critic Henry McBride, Sheeler had done the impossible. He was "a Yankee painter who can get away with Cubism in a country that says Cubism is against the law."

In 1927 and 1928, on commission from the Ford Motor Company, Sheeler made thirty-two photographs of the River Rouge manufacturing plant for a Philadelphia advertising agency. These superbly crafted images were used in company publications to celebrate the 2,000-acre factory where Henry Ford's Model A was to be produced and assembled in one location. *River Rouge Plant* is the third of five paintings based on the photographs. This series marked Sheeler's first painting of an industrial subject, a subject which

represents America's fascination with technology and the machine aesthetic. In this work, which at first seems almost photographically real, the artist concentrates on an unpopulated scene of tightly configured geometric forms. The precise, immaculate, and linear elements contrast with the liquid gold-bronze reflectivity of the water.

Most of the claims made about the "Americanness" of Sheeler's Precisionism came from critics rather than the artist himself. Although at one point Sheeler wrote that he "should feel a sense of derivation from the country in which I live and work," more typically his comments were directed toward his passion for essential, universal form. He was less interested in creating a national aesthetic than an art of purity that approached the spiritual, which he created by "paying naked attention to the thing itself."

Thomas Hart Benton, unlike Sheeler, was anything but reticent in proclaiming his American artistic identity. That identity took the form of unofficial leadership of the Regionalist movement during the 1930s and 1940s. Regionalism, although heir to the Ashcan School in its interest in capturing the lives of the common people, turned away from urban, East Coast, and modern European-influenced art and looked instead to rural subjects of American life depicted in a "realistic American" style.

Despite the fact that Benton was a hard-drinking, rough talker who liked to portray himself as a



Charles Sheeler (1883-1965)

River Rouge Plant, 1932

Oil on canvas, 20 x 24¹/₈ in.

Purchase



**Thomas
Hart Benton**
(1889-1975)
*The Lord is my
Shepherd*, 1926
Tempera
on canvas,
33 $\frac{1}{4}$ x 27 $\frac{3}{8}$ in.
Purchase

harmonica-playing hillbilly from Missouri, he had a cosmopolitan upbringing. The grandnephew of Missouri's most renowned politician, and the son of a well-heeled lawyer who was elected to Congress, Benton spent eight years of his youth in Washington, D.C. His socially aspiring mother enrolled him in art classes at the Corcoran Gallery of Art. In 1908, at age nineteen, he went to Paris to study and during his three-year stay became conversant with the work of the Impressionists and Post-impressionists. Benton's painting of those years shows the influence of various French artistic styles as well as the Synchronist theories evolved by his close friend Stanton Macdonald-Wright.

The style Benton adopted as his own in the 1920s was not based on the radical innovations of European modern art, but rather on the work of old masters such as Michelangelo, El Greco, and Rubens. In reacting against European modernism, Benton ironically adopted earlier European styles to give form to his distinctively American art. In this light, Benton's vehemently anti-foreign rhetoric is particularly surprising.

Even Benton's *The Lord Is My Shepherd*, considered to be one of the icons of Regionalist painting, is ambivalent in its stylistic origins. In subject and theme, it is in the image of America. Yet, in style, its Renaissance-derived sense of color and form and its Cubist-inspired tilted table are European in origin. Benton once wrote, "for all the contradictory struggles and failures I have gone through with, I have come to

something that is in the image of America...." *The Lord Is My Shepherd* is no exception. It was made on Martha's Vineyard, Massachusetts. This somewhat isolated island, a bastion of Yankee independence, was Benton's summer home beginning in 1920. The subject embodies traditional American values—hard work, family, and prayer. *The Lord Is My Shepherd* somberly presents, in realistic but exaggerated detail, a working-class couple, the Wests, in spare surroundings. The Wests, who were both deaf, are not represented as pitiable, but rather as dignified and formidable in appearance. The title of the work, given on the needlework sampler on the wall, indicates the humble and religious character of this distinctively American couple.

The Whitney Museum was founded on the belief that there was something that could be thought of as American art and that this art needed and merited support. In this exhibition, the viewer can see the results of this commitment: works created in America by artists of diverse cultural origins and in numerous styles that ultimately defy reductive notions of an essential American art.

Adam D. Weinberg

**WHY HAVE SOME
MEDIA BEEN MORE
HIGHLY VALUED
THAN OTHERS?**

In the early years of the twentieth century, the increased use of media other than the traditional oil painting and sculpture freed many artists to explore new ideas, and experiment with more inventive modes of visual communication. Paradoxically, it is exactly these media – drawings, watercolors, pastels, prints, and photography – that have long been seen as less important than their grandiose painted and sculpted counterparts. The often small size and fragility of works on paper are two reasons for their lower valuation. In the case of prints and photographs, the existence of multiple examples has raised questions of originality and authenticity. As for drawings, they are frequently equated with mere preparatory studies, or unfinished, disposable early stages of a concept.

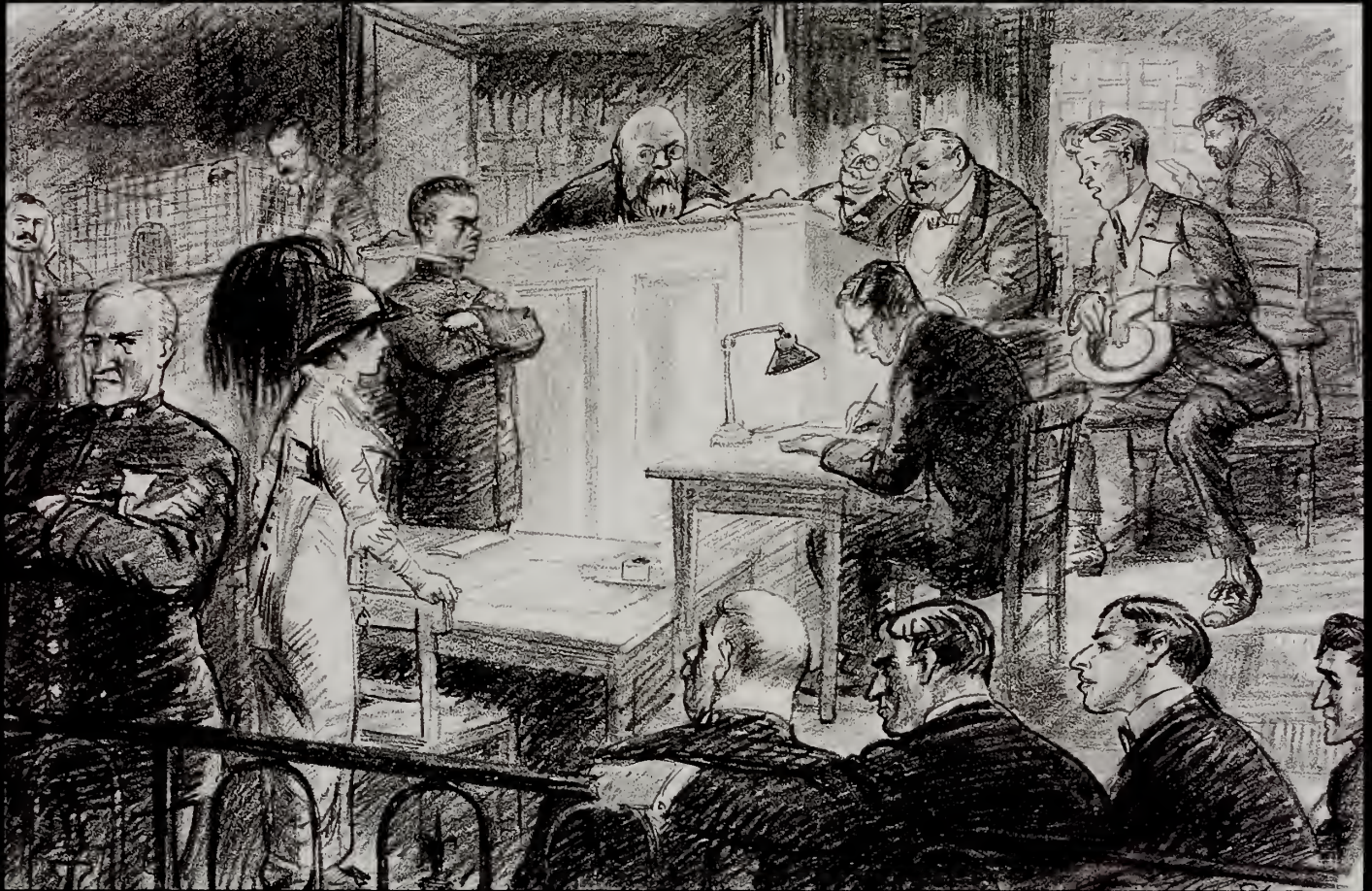
The hierarchy of media as it is understood today – the privileging of painting and sculpture over prints, drawings, and photographs – can be traced back to the traditional, structured course of study in the European fine arts academy system. From the opening in the seventeenth century of the French Royal Academy of Painting and Sculpture (its very title denoting a preference), artists were put through a rigorous training system that began with drawing. But drawing meant nothing more than copying the works of established masters, as well as antique sculpture. Drawing was considered only a means to an end, to the achievement of proficiency in the accepted arts of painting and sculpture. Printmakers, for their part,

were not allowed to become full members of the academies, and their course of study consisted of engraving the grand history and portrait paintings of the masters for graphic dissemination.

This rigid system of drawing and engraving instruction, which came to be adopted in many European cities and later in America, was not designed to spur the imagination or encourage innovation in these media.

The study of works on paper, however, is critical to a thorough understanding of American art. In the early twentieth century, American artists turned to works on paper more diligently and with more diversity than any single group of artists before them. Feeling that the formalized process of painting in oils was yielding academic or formulaic works, many artists sought a form of expression that would allow them to express their individual perception of the world. It was through drawing, the most basic of all media, and its various permutations in pastel, watercolor, and prints, that these artists hoped to approach the essential nature of art making.

A more pragmatic consideration also encouraged the breakdown of the perceived hierarchy of media: artists were seeking out a larger audience, which could be reached only through less expensive, more easily produced media. Works on paper had a distinct advantage in this endeavor, since drawings, pastels, and watercolor involved shorter and less painstaking procedures, while prints could be issued in multiples. On a purely aesthetic level, the new century



John Sloan (1871-1951)

Before Her Makers and Her Judge,

Illustration for "The Masses", August 1913, 1913

Crayon on paper, 16½ x 25 in.

Purchase



Arthur Dove (1880-1946)

Plant Forms, c. 1912

Pastel on canvas, 17 $\frac{1}{4}$ x 23 $\frac{7}{8}$ in.

Purchase, with funds from
Mr. and Mrs. Roy R. Neuberger

seemed to demand a new form of communication, and American artists longed for a mode of expression that would accord with their avant-garde sensibilities.

Among the artists who wanted to expand their audience were those of the Ashcan School just after the turn of the century. Politically liberal and often engaged in Socialist propaganda, they used their art to combat social ills, choosing as their subjects labor strikes, the mistreatment of the lower class, and government corruption. Black-and-white drawings, easily reproducible in popular magazines, newspapers, and political journals, became their medium of choice. It was these artists who, as journalistic illustrators, first broke down the media hierarchy and rebelled against the stuffy Victorian elitism of the fine art academy system. Illustration work served an economic need as well: many of them relied on this commercial art for financial support. Though all members of the Ashcan School were talented painters, many preferred the accessibility of quick, simple line illustration. There is an unstaged quality to the drawings which, through the directness of the charcoal or ink on paper, allowed them to capture the essence of their subject, the vulgar and profane underbelly of urban life.

John Sloan, a member of this group, came to see the life of New York City's slums, parks, and streets as a fascinating study of the way "real" people lived. In his treatise *Gist of Art* (1939), he recalled the importance of his early works on paper and advised young artists: "Do illustrations for a while. It won't hurt you. Get out of the art school and studio. Go out into the

streets and look at life. Fill your notebooks with drawings of people in subways and at lunch counters."

The Socialist publication, *The Masses*, reproduced Sloan's illustration *Before Her Makers and Her Judge*, along with an article on prostitutes and the unfair court system in New York. Sloan shows an elegantly dressed woman in the courtroom where charges of prostitution are being brought against her. The woman, surrounded as she is on all sides by glaring men, is unlikely to receive a fair hearing. Sloan's loose style and quick, cross-hatched shading bring a sense of immediacy to his subject. It seems to have been quickly sketched to catch the tenor of the moment without regard for giving it a "finished" look.

The American modernists, a stylistically diverse group often joined by their interests in avant-garde styles, were less concerned with social messages than with finding a visual vocabulary with which to express modern ideas. For this purpose, they relied heavily on drawings, pastels, watercolors, photography, and printmaking. In subject matter, they took their inspiration from nature and its perceived moral and spiritual superiority, or looked with awe at the new urban and industrial landscape.

Arthur Dove was deeply engaged in developing abstract means to express the vitality of the organic world. In 1911 he turned to drawing in pastel and for the next nine years worked almost exclusively in this medium, often mixing his own pigments in order to achieve the precise intensity of color. The grainy texture of pastel gave these works a deeper, more velvety

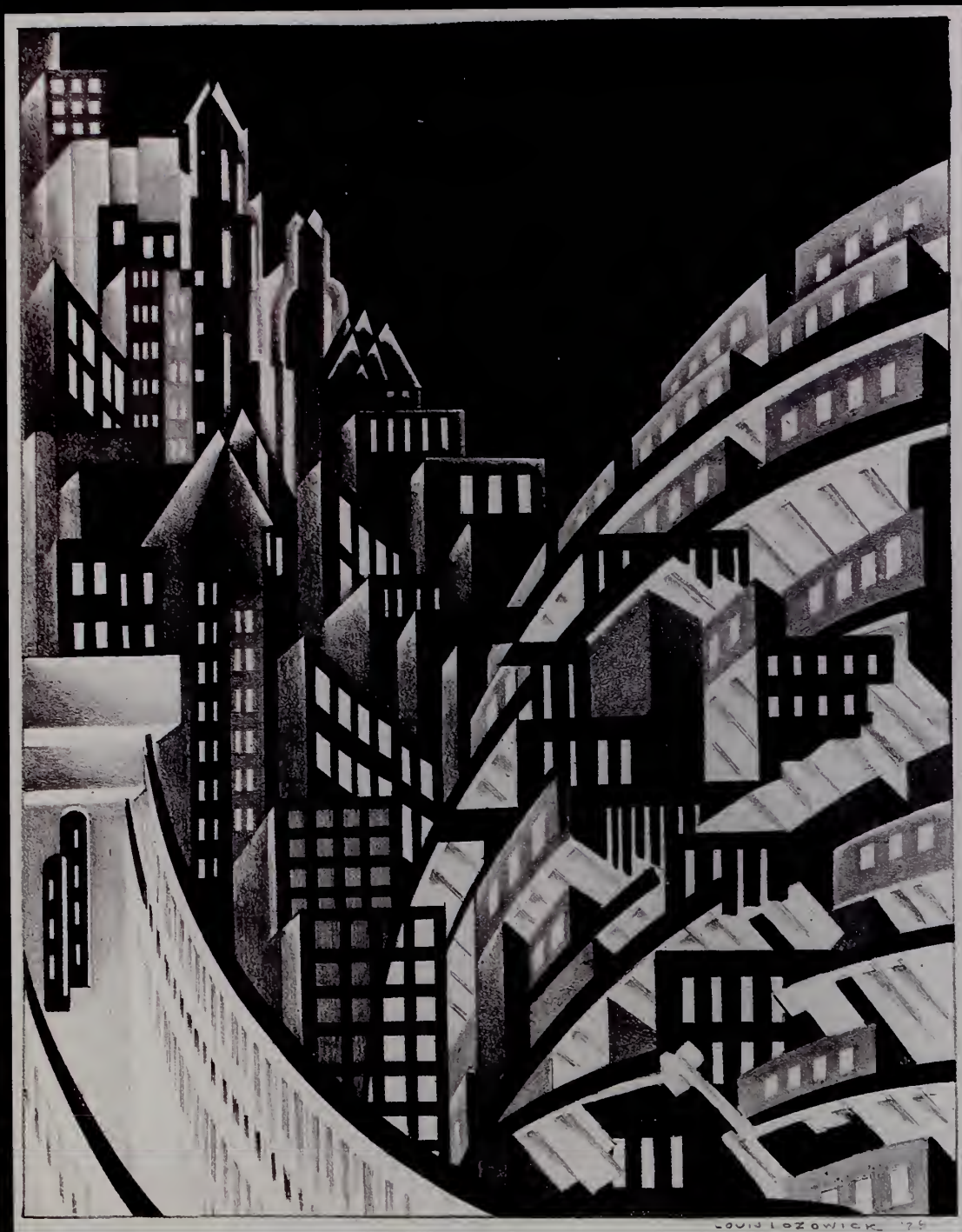


John Marin (1870-1953)

Region of Brooklyn Bridge Fantasy, 1932

Watercolor on paper, 18³/₄ x 22¹/₄ in.

Purchase



Louis Lozowick

(1892-1973)

New York, 1925

Lithograph,

15¹/₁₆ x 11³/₈ in.

Purchase, with funds
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surface than would have been possible with oils, and the medium's soft-edged luminescence imparted a mystical, atmospheric character. In *Plant Forms*, the rich surfaces and subtle, earthy color schemes delineated by softened, ethereal lines provide a tactile quality and a visual depth unique to pastel.

In 1912, *Plant Forms* was exhibited in a series of ten pastels at Alfred Stieglitz's 291 gallery. That pastels alone could be considered worthy material for an entire exhibition signals a major shift from the turn-of-the-century snobbishness about works on paper. That these pastels are considered among the first nonrepresentational works of art ever exhibited by an American further attests to the primacy, in many modernists' careers, of media other than painting and sculpture.

Watercolor is the medium that most clearly blurs the distinction between a work on paper and a painting. For many American modernists, it was also perfectly suited to their aesthetic needs: it had to be laid down on paper with quick strokes of the brush rather than methodically layered and worked over repeatedly. In watercolor, moreover, the paper becomes more than a simple support for the composition. It becomes a visible aspect of the work, essential in producing the luminosity of color inherent in the medium.

Many nineteenth-century American artists favored watercolor, but they tended to use it in much the same way as they used oil paints – for landscapes, portraits, and genre subjects. Artists of the early twentieth century were interested in the potential of watercolor to evoke the energy, spiritualism, and intangible nature

of all things. Henry Miller, the American writer, summed up the medium's appeal to these avant-garde artists: "Watercolor has affinities with the sonnet or haiku, rather than with the lament. It grasps the essential rhythm, the bouquet, the perfume not the substance."

Watercolor played a crucial role for the modernists from the beginning, and for the first time there emerged artists such as John Marin, whose best work is almost all in watercolor. Marin produced his first watercolor in the late 1880s, but his *Region of Brooklyn Bridge Fantasy*, created almost fifty years later, displays his mature style. Literally drawing with water-soluble pigments on paper, Marin superimposed spontaneous color effects on his urban landscape. He regarded his watercolors as drawings and believed that line, whether made by brush or pencil, was crucial. Like the Ashcan artists before him, Marin professed great interest in the changing urban scene. But he used the watercolor medium to paint it as an idea, a manifestation of the dynamic growth of the urban scene.

The Precisionists also turned to urban views. As a term or style, Precisionism did not so much define an organized movement as speak to the way a number of American modernists approached the changing urban and industrial landscape, transforming it into precisely structured forms that became paeans to American technological advancement. With this goal in mind, it is not surprising that many of the artists we now refer to as Precisionists produced their most significant compositions in the form of prints, especially lithographs. To them, the lithographic press conveyed what can



Ad Reinhardt
(1913-1967)
Collage, 1938
Paper collage on
paper, 15 x 11 in.
Gift of an
anonymous donor

best be called a socio-aesthetic message: art that was machine-made was inherently "modern," while "hand-made" works of art were distinctly passé.

Louis Lozowick was one of the artists who brought America's golden age and its burgeoning urban meccas to an international audience through printmaking. In his lithograph, *New York*, he used the special characteristics of lithography to his advantage: the medium's crisp, clean lines delineate a dynamic array of buildings, bridge, and sky; and the wide range of gray tones and rich, velvety texture unique to lithography lend an element of richness and depth to the urban scene. Precisionist prints such as this, with its cool, reductivist style, established the machine, urbanism, and industrialism as legitimate artistic images and did much to promote the status of printmaking in America.

There is another category of works on paper not yet mentioned: the collage, which first engaged the imagination of American artists after World War I. Collage, a term meaning gluing or pasting paper, first appeared in the work of Picasso and Braque. In this country in the 1920s, Arthur Dove, whose rejection of traditionally accepted media was evidenced in his early devotion to pastel, created fantastical constructions of found objects collaged to canvas, paper, or board. Max Weber, in *Chinese Restaurant*, used collage more subtly by pasting small, almost indistinguishable scraps at the center of the painting's revolving activity.

By the 1930s, purely abstract, geometric styles began to develop in America. In this non-objective approach, art was not meant to reference something outside of itself, but instead to be an independent,

formal expression. Since it was believed that photography and film could most faithfully reproduce the world around us, it was redundant for painting to attempt to accomplish the same. For this reason, many abstract artists in the 1930s turned to collage as a way of abandoning the inherent illusionism of painting and drawing in favor of a compositional structure held in pure balance by such formal qualities as color and shape. Ad Reinhardt was twenty-four years old in 1938 and just beginning his artistic career when he first experimented with carefully cut and composed paper. In *Collage*, he activates the entire surface with shifting planes of color. The straight-edged austerity of clean rectangles in close-valued, complementary tones of colored papers denies emotionalism or personal touch and assures an expression completely severed from the natural world.

Collage represents the culminating moment in the history of works on paper in America from 1900 through 1940. Like the earlier black-and-white illustrations of the Ashcan School or the lithographs of the Precisionists, it emerged as a medium in response to a new artistic vision. The artists discussed here attempted to redefine the essential nature of art making, leading them to break from existing artistic traditions. In devising new forms of expression, they turned to works on paper, gradually undermining the longstanding media hierarchy and laying the groundwork for subsequent generations of American artists to experiment with nontraditional art-making practices.

Beth Venn

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